The Bohemian Iconoclast and the Corporate Giant: Julie Taymor's Staging of Disney's *The Lion King*, or The Portrait of the Avant-Garde Artist as a Corporate Employee

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The aim of this article is to examine the socioeconomic conditions that enable avant-garde artists to work for multinational corporations without sacrificing their individual aesthetic. A close reading of Julie Taymor's critically acclaimed and commercially successful staging of Disney's *The Lion King* will show that in our predominantly visual late-capitalist societies a sophisticated postdramatic visual aesthetic can be commodified without alienating the mass audiences. This commodification forces us to reevaluate the traditional modernist definitions of art in immanent aesthetic terms in a postmodern culture that witnesses the thorough commodification of high art and the high aestheticization of popular culture. These modifications in the cultural and aesthetic spheres will be analyzed through a Marxist theoretical frame that puts the modernist rigid dichotomies between high and popular art in a historical perspective.

In 1995, Disney shocked the Broadway establishment by announcing that Julie Taymor would direct the stage version of the hit animated film musical *The Lion King*, the company's most valuable property. One of the prominent figures of the American avant-garde theatrical scene, Taymor has developed, over the years, a fiercely individual, idiosyncratic visual aesthetic that can be easily described as the antithesis of Disney's family-friendly, widely popular or populist aesthetic. In *The New York Times*, Ben Brantley wrote that the artistic marriage of the bohemian iconoclast and the corporate giant has been discussed as though Donald Trump and the provocative performance artist Karen Finley had decided to set up housekeeping; and, as the

sustained success of the stage musical both on Broadway and all around the world proves, these strange bedfellows indeed live in blissful harmony. *The Lion King*'s successful merging of corporate economic interests with progressive visuals is not an isolated phenomenon. It must be rather considered as one more example of a dominant practice, adopted not only by the megamusical's corporate impresarios but also by the film industry's executives, since, as we shall see, most of Hollywood's blockbuster films are visually conceived and directed by *auters* from the art-house film world. The aim of this paper is to examine the cultural conditions that enable such unholy alliances between elitist, avant-garde artists and corporate moguls. A close reading of Taymor's staging techniques from a sociological point of view will prove that a highly sophisticated visual aesthetic form serves perfectly the economic interests of late capitalist society, where commodity production and consumption are intertwined with image production and consumption. In this way, Taymor's staging of *The Lion King* becomes emblematic of how an aggressively imagistic and fiercely individual aesthetic, which could be considered revolutionary, according to modernist evaluating standards, can be thoroughly commodified in postmodern culture, altering radically the role of the individual artist and his/ her relation with the masses.

Taymor's successful crossover to the mainstream would never have taken place if Disney had not decided to conquer Broadway. The impetus for the company's foray into the theatre business was given after the phenomenal success of the imported British musical blockbusters, like *Cats* (1981), *Les Misérables* (1985) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), which redefined the economic potential of the musical as a Broadway fixture, a touring production, and an international export. Moreover, Disney was not a stranger to musical aesthetics: the company had a long history in the production of animated film musicals; and, after the renaissance of its animation department in the mid-1980s, it has saturated the film and video market with a string of musical blockbusters, which could be easily transferred to the stage, since they were scored by Broadway veterans and had the benefit of immense name recognition. Furthermore, the theme-park aesthetic that the British megamusicals had introduced on the musical stage was actually invented by Walt Disney himself, who, in 1955 in southern California, opened the first theme park, Disneyland, which over the years had staged many live attractions inspired by the company's catalogue of animated film musicals. The conquering of Broadway and the international musical stage would offer Disney the same economic opportunities that its themed live shows had provided: the further and more intensified exploitation of existing titles that could generate more

possibilities for merchandising, create new audiences and, in short, achieve what, in economic terms, is known as synergy, the phenomenon that occurs when every arm of a conglomerate successfully feeds the next.

Disney entered the megamusical arena in 1994 with the stage adaptation of its 1991 animated musical blockbuster, *Beauty and the Beast*. The film exemplified Disney's standard practice of taking a well-known fairytale and transforming it into a corporate property, generating a billion-dollar profit through theatrical, video and DVD releases, theme-park adaptations, soundtrack sales and merchandising. Apart from achieving the status of a franchise in its own right, *Beauty and the Beast* also gained artistic credibility, as it became the first animated feature to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, received rave reviews and was considered by Frank Rich, the then chief drama critic of *The New York Times*, as a musical that bettered anything Broadway could offer (Singer 169). It was probably this warm reception of the film by the so-called "butcher of Broadway" that convinced Disney president, Michael Eisner, to take a chance with *Beauty and the Beast* on 42nd street. On stage, Disney's fairytale did not deviate from the standard megamusical formulas. Thematically, it had many similarities with *The Phantom of the Opera*, which is, after all, a variation on the myth of *Beauty and the Beast*, and, in its staging, it combined its predecessor's romantic imagery with the wild fantasy of *Cats* and the extravagance of *Sunset Boulevard* (1993). Overall, it was a highly efficient but rather predictable adaptation of the original, which was met with enthusiasm by the audience but with derision by the critics, who obviously feared an oncoming Disneyfication and Mickey-Mousing of Broadway. The vitriolic comments and the bad publicity were hurting the public face of the company, and it was obvious that if Disney wanted to realize its theatrical, empire-building ambitions it would need a change of direction, which was taken when Eisner made president and vice president of Walt Disney Theatrical Productions Peter Schneider and Thomas Schumacher respectively: the two men who were responsible for the economic and aesthetic rejuvenation of Disney's feature animation division in Hollywood.

Schneider and Schumacher knew theatre very well, as they had spent most of their pre-Disney years in the not-for-profit theatre world. Their first venture as heads of Disney Theatrical was the stage adaptation of *The Lion King*, which broke box office records in 1994 and was considered as one of the greatest animated film musicals ever made. Schneider and Schumacher believed that this was the musical that would change the perception of what Disney could achieve on Broadway, and, for this reason, it had to be "Not just different," but "Push-the-envelope unique. Astonishing" (Schumacher qtd. in

Singer 170). To achieve this end, they decided to take unprecedented risks and not repeat the well-known megamusical formulas, but rather hire a director, unknown to the world of musicals and commercial theatre, a visionary, whose progressive theatrical style could bring a refreshing musical aesthetic, able to astound the hostile Broadway establishment. Thus, in contrast to *Beauty and the Beast*, which was conceived, developed and staged by Disney's theme-park division, *The Lion King* was entrusted to the hands of Taymor, whose output comprised "fiercely individual music-theater works that never condescended, never pandered to the lowest common denominator, and never compromised" (145).[1] With the choice of Taymor, Schneider and Schumacher were determined to offer the boldest, most audacious and cutting-edge theatrical work that had ever been presented on a commercial stage, and, in doing so, make everyone on Broadway take Disney very seriously.

Of course, whether the production would also satisfy the company's mass family audiences was an altogether different question, as, from the outset, Taymor made it clear that she would not compromise her artistic integrity. She immediately rejected a theme-park and kid-friendly representation of the animal kingdom in full-body suits and whole masks that would eliminate the human presence in order to achieve a naturalistic representation of the animal characters. Instead, she tried to achieve the combination of the human and the animalistic through more poetic, abstract and impressionistic methods. Taymor is particularly known for her mastery of many multi-cultural traditional theatrical crafts, especially puppetry, and, in *The Lion King*, she exploited her expertise in this domain to the maximum. Her overarching visual concept was not to hide the actors animating the puppets, but rather emphasize the duality of the animate and the inanimate, which would also open many possibilities for the exploration of the duality between the human and the animalistic element. For example, in one of her earliest designs for a zebra, the zebra's neck and head extend off the dancer's chest, the rear part extends off the dancer's back and the performer's legs form the animal's front legs (Taymor 30). Once Taymor realized the visual possibilities that this intersection between the animate/ inanimate, human/ animalistic form opens up, she experimented with even more radical stylizations and devices, such as the one she calls "corporate puppetry": "one person conveys the essential movement of a group, often by manipulating or wearing a device that carries multiple figures. For instance,

1. Taymor specializes in ritualistic performance theatre, heavily influenced by Oriental practices. Among her most acclaimed works are *The King Stag* (1984), *Juan Darien, a Carnival Mass* (1988) and *The Green Bird* (1996).

five dancers will each bear three gazelle puppets; one on each head and one on each arm, thus creating a herd of fifteen" (31).

Similarly radical techniques were used for the creation of masks, which were designed according to the principles of the minimalist and architecturally severe African sculpture and carried symbolic meanings. For example, the austerely symmetrical mask for Mufasa, the powerful lion king, is embellished with surrounding orbs, rings that represent his mane, and make him look like a Sun God (41). The mask is worn as a headdress above the actor's head and, via a cable control hidden in the sleeve of the costume, it can move forward and backward or from side to side (53). When worn above the actor's head, the mask preserves the vertical line of the human body, but, when it moves forward, it can provide the horizontal shape of an animal by suggesting a lion's arching spine and create a powerful effect, when the actor playing Mufasa, using two swords as front legs, strides regally about the stage (53). The masks serve an ideographic function, as they communicate in a single image a character's dominant trait, but since they are mostly worn above the head, the actor's facial expressions as well as his/her body movements can diversify the image projected by the mask. As in the relationship between puppet and puppeteer, Taymor creates the singular essence of a character through the interplay between the performer and his/ her extended and sculpted animal character (124-5), and this interplay results in a kind of theatre that is both highly formalized (echoing Gordon Craig's Über-marionette) and corporeal, throbbing with human physicality. Taymor worked extensively with her performers for the development of a corporeal language, "a physical, spatial, and rhythmic score" (143), which could communicate viscerally but also abstractly emotions, mental states and character traits. In this way, she created an Artaudean corporeal "poetry in space" that extends the boundaries of the human form, not only through animalistic gesture, but also through the use of prosthetic sculpted components, and so "reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature" (Artaud 27).

Taymor is certainly no stranger to Artaudean techniques and methods. She is one of the primary exponents of American performance theatre, whose father is Antonin Artaud, and her works are characterized by the master's trademark disregard for conventional representational techniques and a preference for gestural and hieroglyphic modes of representation, which emphasize the athleticism of the body and the phenomenal density of the scenic environment as sensory field. Apart from an intensely felt sensory field, the Artaudean stage is also an enchanting and enchanted space, dominated by

magical forces, which present themselves in Taymor's theatre as well. Her insistence on bringing the puppeteer on stage and exploring his/ her relationship with the puppet, the way he/ she infuses life into a lifeless thing, aims at celebrating the magical power of the human spirit, its ability to animate an inanimate object (Taymor 29). In this way, *The Lion King*'s ritualistic metatheatricality produces its own *gestus*: an instantly readable theatrical sign, sketching in a hieroglyphic manner the phenomenon of animism, the virtual animation of the inanimate world, which is encountered in primitive societies, but also makes a triumphant comeback in postmodern culture. Indeed, our hypermediated culture transforms everyday life into a festive celebration of animism, as increasingly artificial, digitally processed, ethereal images assume an autonomous existence and dominate lived experience. Of course, in our societies the virtual animation of the inanimate world is not only the product of human imagination but also the outcome of technological "magic" and prowess; and *The Lion King*, in combining traditional animatronics with the megamusical's techno-aesthetics (mainly through computerized set and light design), creates a diachronic link between animism and animation, as analogous manifestations of the human craving for magic.

The magical tone of the show is set from the opening number, "Circle of Life," in which Rafiki, the shaman baboon, summons the animal kingdom to celebrate the birth of Simba, King Mufasa and Queen Sarabi's son. The rising curtain reveals an almost bare stage, with a ground row of distant mountains, suggesting the African savanna, enveloped in a cyclorama lighted from behind in order to create the illusion of an infinite deep orange sky. Against this enveloping sky, a giant sun appears, a slatted saffron circle made from ribs of aluminum with silk strips attached to them, giving the impression of the shimmering lines the sun creates on a desert horizon (78). Rafiki's chant breaks the silence of this haunting image and the animal kingdom gradually occupies the stage, as animal puppets with their puppeteers move onstage from the wings or parade down the aisles in close proximity to the audience. The whole theatre is filled with Taymor's hieroglyphic combinations of African sculpture, human and animal form, suggesting, in a poetic manner, birds, cheetahs, gazelles, giraffes, zebras, wildebeest and elephants. As the animals slowly gather on the stage, the computer-controlled Pride Rock, a revolving asymmetrical construction, spirals majestically upward to a height of twenty feet, with Mufasa and Sarabi at the pinnacle. The number ends with Rafiki on the Pride Rock presenting Simba, the new-born and future lion king, to the animal kingdom. Through her evocative imagery, Taymor transforms a number celebrating the miracle of life into one affirming the power of theatrical magic,

and its effect is so strong that the deeply moved audiences, at least in the performances that I attended, burst out in enthusiastic screams or cry throughout the number. After such a dynamic opening, one wonders if a coup of similar power can be achieved, but Taymor's imagination proves to be inexhaustible, as she unravels one memorable stage picture after the other: the grassland journey, the elephant graveyard with its menacing hyenas, the mourning lionesses pulling white ribbons of tears from the eyes of their urn-like masks, the tropical paradise of the jungle and the most spectacular sequence, the wildebeest stampede.

Overall, *The Lion King* exemplifies Taymor's favorite technique of "integrat[ing] the human form mostly as an element in landscape-like spatial structures" (Lehmann 81). The systematic de-anthropomorphization of the theatrical space aims at liberating the stage from representational obligations, in order to transform it into a site for the inscription of material signifiers, created by the irreducible interactions of architectural structures, lighting, human bodies and stage props. In this way, Taymor's landscapes achieve an unprecedented subjection of the musical stage to a radically and aggressively pictorial and formalistic directorial gaze in order to offer a purely "visual dramaturgy" (93), in which the performance text is conceived primarily as a "*scenic poem*" (63): "a site of an 'écriture' in which all components of the theatre become letters in a poetic 'text'" (58). Taymor's directorial style is, obviously, postdramatic rather than dramatic. In his seminal analysis of postdramatic performance art, Hans-Thies Lehmann labelled as postdramatic every kind of theatrical experimentation which achieves the "retheatricalization" of theatre through a renewed emphasis on the theatricality and materiality of the performance (51). In this way, the theatre is liberated from the dominance of the dramatic text, which is now "merely a component with equal rights in a gestic, musical, visual, etc., total composition" (46).[2] How-

2. Postdramatic theatre calls for a vertical instead of a linear, horizontal kind of reading, as the spectator is immersed in aesthetically dense landscapes offered for phenomenal contemplation and scrutiny. Still, Taymor knows that every mass cultural text needs a minimum of syntagmatic, logico-temporal, dramatic organization, and so uses the popular narrative of the original animated film as a guideline in her postdramatic maze. She retains the adorable comic situations but also emphasizes the epic and heroic dimensions of the story, which is after all an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for children, and, finally, introduces a strong African symbolism that enhances the overall ritualistic atmosphere. The transition from vaudevillian comedy to epic heroics and African ritual is usually abrupt and resembles channel switching to different programs on television, which is, nevertheless, as Fredric Jameson points out, "the very epitome of a postmodern attention and perceptual apparatus" (*Postmodernism* 373). However,

ever, the use of the term ‘‘postdramatic’’ in such a visibly commercial context is highly problematic, because the visual dramaturgy of postdramatic theatre is theorized by Lehmann in a strictly avant-garde context and perceived as anti-commercial, obscure and solipsistic, an enemy of cultural populism, resisting the capitalist forces of commodification.

In his book, Lehmann justifies the revolutionary potential of a postdramatic, predominantly visual theatre, by going back to the theories of the *Tel Quel* group. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, prominent members of the French journal *Tel Quel*, like Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, devised the theory of textuality, the aim of which was to create a model of aesthetic and cultural revolution, influenced by the high-modernist and avant-garde artistic practices of the past, that could inspire similar neo-modernist experimentations in the present.[3] According to this theory, the narrative, cause-and-effect organization of many mass-cultural artifacts reflects the instrumental, means/ends rationality of a middle-class capitalist mentality. The antidote to this instrumentalization and, hence, commodification of art is a quintessentially formalist, textual aesthetic, which foregrounds aesthetic form instead of narrative content, the materiality, the texture of the word (in poetry and fiction) or the image (in theatre and cinema) instead of their meaning-carrying functions. However, nowadays, this textual aesthetic, that once seemed so resistant to commodification, appears to be thoroughly commodified, as blockbuster films, MTV videos, TV commercials—our postmodern visual culture in its entirety—have become obsessed with the texture of the image and the intensification of its sensual impact, through the use of technology, sometimes at the expense of any narrative coherence or meaningful content.

So if Taymor’s postdramatic textual aesthetic seemed at first too progressive for a Disney show, in the end, it proved to be the most appropriate one, not only because it resonated with the cultural *zeitgeist*, but also because it was Disney, with its animated films, that first introduced mass audiences, from the first decades of the twentieth century, to textual aesthetics. This

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these syntagmatic incongruities do not delimit the aesthetic pleasure that *The Lion King* offers in its totality, because the show is so powerfully organized on a paradigmatic axis around Taymor’s overarching visual concept (the duality of human/ animalistic and animate/ inanimate) that it becomes a wholly gratifying spatial experience: one that offers an unforgettable journey to the African landscape as seen through the eyes of Taymor’s postdramatic imagination.

3. The classic texts, where this theory is elaborated, are Roland Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) and Julia Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia UP, 1984).

illuminating point is made by Fredric Jameson, who argues that the textual, "materialistic," and "paradoxically nonfictive" specificity of the animated film "is at least twofold":

> involving on the one hand, a constitutive match or fit between a musical language and a visual one (two fully elaborated systems which are no longer subordinate to one another as in fiction film), and, on the other, the palpably produced character of animation's images, which in their ceaseless metamorphosis now obey the "textual" laws of writing and drawing rather than the "realistic" ones of verisimilitude, the force of gravity, etc. Animation constituted the first great school to teach the reading of material signifiers (rather than the narrative apprenticeship of objects of representation—characters, actions, and the like). (*Postmodernism* 77)

Such a textual aesthetic gradually dominated mass culture, and its influence is intensely felt in our postmodern artifacts, whose digitally processed imagery renders obsolete the photographic representation of the world in favor of a highly artificial, textual, hyperreal recreation of it. In fact, one can easily summarize the whole history of the twentieth-century mass-cultural aesthetics in terms of a gradual absorption and commodification of this textual visual aesthetic, to the point that, nowadays, it is impossible to talk about avant-garde experimentation in purely formal aesthetic terms, as every seemingly revolutionary aesthetic trend is instantly appropriated by the cultural mainstream. It is exactly this commodification of a previously radical high aestheticism that allows such unholy alliances between avant-garde artists, like Taymor, and corporate impressarios, like Disney.

This merging of corporate economic interests with progressive visuals signals the utter instrumentalization in postmodern culture of the previously relatively autonomous aesthetic realm. The sphere of the aesthetic emerged "at the dawn of modernizing Enlightenment" as a realm dissociated "from the rational and the scientific," a "newly constituted marginal space" where "the sensory and the sensible" take flight (Jameson, *Late Marxism* 162). The aesthetic functioned as "a Utopian realm of beauty . . . beyond the fallen empirical world of money and business activity," whose constitutive autonomy provides it with the "capacity to condemn . . . the totality of *what* is . . . by its own very existence" (Jameson, *The Syntax of History* 196). By contrast, in postmodern culture, the aesthetic loses its constitutive autonomy and negativity and is thoroughly instrumentalized, becoming a mass-produced and consumed commodity. This systematic colonization of the aesthetic realm by

the forces of capitalist economic production has a long history, which has been extensively documented and theorized. For example, the Frankfurt School gave us a detailed account of how the advent of mass media, radio, film and television, contributed to the creation of a "culture industry" that subjected artistic means to a Fordist logic of mass production, uniformity and standardization and made them serve ideological ends, i.e. the aestheticization and fetishization of the capitalist values, institutions and commodities;[4] while the situationist Guy Debord argued that capitalist society is so saturated with mediated aesthetic idealizations of its own products that it has to be defined as "society of the spectacle."[5]

Of course, what Debord and his predecessors could not predict is the turn that spectacle would take in postmodern culture, as, nowadays, the very techno-aesthetic machine that fetishizes capitalism's products and ideologies becomes a fetish object in itself. Hence, our culture's insatiable appetite for mega-budgeted techno-aesthetic form, which offers not only a surplus-pleasure, but often becomes the main pleasure, with the ideological representational content functioning as a pretext and excuse for the suspension of a perpetual present of audio-visual thrills. This is the absolute triumph and absolute commodification of high aestheticism. The consumption of empty aesthetic form that offers nothing but what Dana Polan calls "the promise of rich sight: not the sight of particular fetishized objects, but sight itself as richness, as the ground for extensive experience" (qtd. in Mulvey 12). Such an appetite for an autonomized aesthetic form is only possible in a society where spectacle is not only confined to our TV screens, film screens and theatrical stages, but rather reorganizes every kind of human activity, from working and shopping to traveling, clubbing, dining out or simply walking down the street, as a fascinating multimedia aesthetic experience. With electronic screens invading our living environs in the form of LCD computer monitors, plasma TV displays, mobile touch screen surfaces and large-scale projection architectural hypersurfaces, human space is thoroughly aestheticized and becomes a hypermediated stage upon which the phantasmagoria of consumer capitalism is perpetually enacted. In this thoroughly aestheticized environment, the representational value of the commodity becomes more crucial than ever and the constant revolutionization of the aesthetic realm as important as the revolu-

4. For an introduction to the writings of the Frankfurt School on the culture industry, see Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).
5. See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

tions in the realms of production and distribution. As capitalism's techno-aesthetic machine penetrates and reorganizes every aspect of human life, spectacle is not anymore an object of contemplation but rather becomes a lived experience. Consequently, the distinction between spectacle and spectator, art and life is erased and social life approaches the form of "total theatre" (Baudrillard 71).

One of the most famous areas that have recently succumbed to this process of high-tech theatricalization is 42nd street and responsible for this transformation was no other than Disney. In July 1995, a formal announcement was made that the company signed a forty-nine-year lease on the derelict New Amsterdam theatre, which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, had staged *The Ziegfeld Follies* and was now to become the home of *The Lion King*. After a costly restoration, the historic theatre became once again the shining jewel of 42nd street and the symbol of Disney's new-found Broadway supremacy. The company's decision to own its own theatre venue on Broadway affected greatly both the economy of New York and the look of the theatre district. Following Disney's example, a stream of chain stores, movie theatres and conglomerates were suddenly clamoring for space on the Times Square area (Adler 72), and this economic reinvigoration was exactly the aim of then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who worked hard to meet Disney's demands (206). As a company specializing in wholesome family entertainment, Disney was particularly concerned with the atmosphere of urban decay characterizing the Times Square area, which after World War II had been slowly transformed "into a grotesque American version of a Felliniesque inferno" (9). With Giuliani's intervention, the sex shops and massage parlors disappeared and in their place were erected office and retail skyscrapers, high-rise hotels, multiplexes, restaurants, the headquarters of MTV, a Virgin Records store, the World Wrestling Federation and Madame Tussaud's wax museum. The bustling corporate activity has altered radically the look of the area, which is now "ablaze with a crazy quilt of signs and lights—stock and news tickers, enormous billboards, neon come-ons for every conceivable product, live video feeds—that transforms the theatre district at night into a twenty-first-century corporate assault on the senses" (207). With its rapidly changing corporate imagery animating solid architectural space, the whole area seems to participate in its own peculiar performance art, offering, thus, a spectacle quite similar to or even more impressive than the one that is staged inside the theatres.

Of course, all these transformations would have been impossible without the commercial and artistic triumph of Taymor's staging of *The Lion King*. Her radical visuals won over the critics and the sophisticated theatergoers,

giving to the company a much-needed artistic credibility; but, at the same time, they did not alienate the family audiences, at which Disney's products are mostly targeted, since today even five-year-old children acquire, through their exposure to digitally animated films and video games, a visual sophistication unimaginable for adult middle-class audiences fifty years ago. Inspired by Taymor's achievement, Disney hired Anne Hamburger, once a well-known producer in New York's avant-garde theatre scene, to supervise the company's theme park and cruise ship productions and use her theatre contacts in order to bring in some of the most established and promising theatre artists (100). If we add to the directors and conceptualists the whole host of architects and designers who are employed by the company, one can speak of a new form of "postmodern patronage," as Disney has been gradually transformed "from a simple producer of cartoons to a postmodern and corporate version of the Medici family of the Renaissance" (Lavin qtd. in Phillips 284). This form of postmodern patronage that brings together elitist, avant-gardist, bohemian iconoclasts with corporate giants extends beyond the theatrical realm and becomes a dominant phenomenon in the movie industry as well. Nowadays, most of the blockbuster films are visually conceived and directed by *auteurs* from the art-house film world: Peter Jackson directed *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003), Bryan Singer the first two *X-Men* movies (2000, 2003) and the new *Superman* film (2006), Ang Lee gave us *Hulk* (2003), Alfonso Cuarón helmed the third *Harry Potter* installment (2004), Sam Raimi did all three *Spider-Man* movies (2002, 2004, 2007) and Chris Nolan reinvigorated, with *Batman Begins* (2005) and *The Dark Knight* (2008), the Batman franchise, which was initiated by another art-house director, Tim Burton. The corporations behind these films hire the above visionaries and expect them to employ their idiosyncratic visual language in order to create the most aesthetically progressive, cutting-edge imagery.

Most of these directors have managed to make fortunes out of their successful forays into the mainstream, without seemingly having to compromise their artistic integrity, since they bring intact the visual style that makes each one of them unique as an *auteur*. For this reason, the crossover to the mainstream is not considered anymore a one-way street. Taymor, for example, after the triumph of *The Lion King*, was involved in many projects that were not intended for a mass audience, while, at the same time, developing the theatrical adaptation of *Spider-Man*, which is scheduled to open on Broadway in 2010. This is once again a high-profile commercial project with an astronomical budget ($40 million), covered by a conglomerate of corporations, in-

cluding Marvel Entertainment and Sony Entertainment. Predictably, Taymor's involvement makes *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* an eagerly anticipated musical, transforming the director into the star of the show, as everyone on Broadway waits to see whether Taymor's *mise-en-scène* will equal or surpass her bold visual interpretation of *The Lion King*.

This concentration on the formal aspects of a theatrical production proves how aestheticized mass-cultural products have become; and this high aestheticization of mass culture forces us to redefine the concept of artistic integrity, which is still modernist in its nature, perpetuating the myth that cultivating and never compromising an idiosyncratic aesthetic form can constitute a revolutionary act in its own right. However, is there a more blatant form of compromise and selling out for an artist than becoming a corporate employee and seeing his/ her aesthetic form, no matter how ambitious it might be considered in immanent formal terms, be used for the promotion of the ideologies and economic interests of global capitalism?

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